

**Review of Higher Education Pedagogy and Theory Primer:  
*McKeachie's Teaching Tips*  
Benjamin J. Schwartz, Asia University**

Abstract

*McKeachie's Teaching Tips* by Wilbert J. McKeachie and Marilla Svinicki and other contributing authors is a general “how-to” manual for teaching at the college and university level. In twenty-three chapters divided over seven parts, *Teaching Tips* broadly covers the ins and outs of higher education. Topics include course preparation, syllabus design, evaluation, classroom management, assessment, teaching methodology, ethics, technology in the classroom, diversity, and teaching techniques, as well as bigger picture subjects such as student motivation, balancing curricula, and preparing students to become independent, self-directed learners.

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Originally published in 1994, the addition being reviewed here is the 13th and was published with substantial revisions in 2011 by well-known educational services provider Cengage Learning. Each chapter is handled by an expert in the content field and addresses specific issues and topics related to higher education. This book lends itself particularly well to EFL and ESL education at the university and college level, as the techniques and issues presented are germane to language instruction. As a single teaching and education reference, I believe that tertiary level EFL instructors could benefit from this well-conceived book. This article presents an overview of the topics covered in *Teaching Tips*, as well as a conclusion regarding their efficacy to EFL/ESL programs.

**The Authors**

Dr. Wilbert J. McKeachie's biographical information was published in a *Teaching of Psychology* interview in 2008:

Wilbert J. McKeachie has been the president of the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Association of Higher Education, the American Psychological Foundation, the Division of Educational and School Psychology of the International Association of Applied Psychology, and APA's Divisions 2 and 15. He received his PhD at the University of Michigan in 1949 and is former Director of the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. He also served as Chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Michigan from 1961 to 1971. Professor McKeachie has received eight honorary degrees, the American Psychological Foundation Gold Medal for Lifetime Contributions to Psychology, and the American Psychological Association Presidential Citation for exemplary service to the academic and scientific community. (McKeachie, 2015)

Dr. Marilla Svinicki's background information was published in an *International Higher Education Teaching & Learning Association* interview in 2011:

Dr. Marilla Svinicki is a Professor and Area Chair (Human Development, Culture and Learning Sciences) in the Department of Educational Psychology and the retired director of the Center for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Texas at Austin (USA). She currently teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in instructional psychology, learning, cognition and motivation. Her research interests include application of principles of learning to instruction in higher education and development of faculty and graduate students as teachers. (Svinicki, 2011)

### **Summary and Review of Individual Parts**

#### **Part 1**

Part 1 of *Teaching Tips* covers introductory topics over three chapters: "Introduction", "Countdown for Course Preparation" and "Meeting a Class for the First Time". This section provides a general overview of what is to come in the book as well as presenting techniques and suggestions for preparing for a course. In the introduction, McKeachie begins by stressing that a course must to some extent resemble the overall philosophy of an institution (McKeachie, 2011, p.3). If a department has a certain expectation of how a course should be taught, then ideally an instructor will adhere to certain principles in the classroom as they are agreed upon by faculty. Chapter 2 is particularly useful as it succinctly outlines the steps necessary for planning and preparing for a course, while Chapter 3 discusses the importance of being prepared for meeting a new class. McKeachie advises that common goals at the end of any first meeting should be that students will have:

1. A sense of where they're going and how they'll get there.
2. A feeling that the other members of class are not strangers, that you (the instructor) and they are forming a group in which it's safe to participate.

3. An awareness that you care about their learning and will be fair.
4. An expectation that the class will be both valuable and fun. (McKeachie, 2011, pp. 27-28)

In this respect, as well as in his advice regarding planning for and preparing a course, McKeachie takes a broad, holistic view that takes into account the administration, educators, students and curriculum. Finally, the author admonishes his readers that, “Teaching skillfully may be less time consuming than teaching badly” (McKeachie, 2011, p.5). Indeed, Part 1 of the book focuses on the importance of thoughtfulness, preparation and self-awareness as a means of facilitating a successful learning environment.

## **Part 2**

The second part of *Teaching Tips* involves basic skills for facilitating student learning. The seven chapters included are “Reading as Active Learning”, “Facilitating Discussion: Posing Problems, Listening, Questioning”, “How to Make Lectures More Effective”, “Assessing, Testing, and Evaluating: Grading is Not the Most Important Function”, “Testing: The Details”, “Good Designs for Written Feedback for Students”, and “The ABCs of Assigning Grades”. As the chapter titles indicate, this section is largely concerned with evaluation and assessment as a means of facilitating active student learning. Most interesting, and perhaps useful to Asia University’s CELE instructors and other EFL educators, is Chapter 5, which offers theory and suggestions for best facilitating group discussions. Think-Pair-Share (TPS) is proffered as a safe entrée to group discussion at even the lowest levels of linguistic competency. In smaller classrooms, students can be divided into groups and posed questions, problems, cases or tasks. This can be done immediately in a group, or with individuals first, who then join groups and discuss their individual opinions, answers and ideas about the problem or task. The benefit of this is that students will have to restate their conclusions providing them the opportunity to incorporate new language and then use it authentically. Giving students the chance to brainstorm

individually and then share their work with others is a useful means of lowering the affective barrier to language production and instilling confidence in slower-producing students. Higher achieving students are also afforded the opportunity to show leadership where needed.

In addition to the practical discussion advice offered in Chapter 5, *Teaching Tips* extensively covers assessment and evaluation. In short, it is recommended that assessment always serve learning needs and then curriculum or department needs. “Teaching to the test” should not be done unless it genuinely contributes to the development and learning of a student. Conversely, an instructor must always be cognizant of the goals and objectives of a unit or course and how they adhere to the broader goals of the department and university. Finally, Part 2 highlights the importance of feedback and assigning grades given the argument that students learn from feedback and are able to develop from their mistakes (McKeachie, 2011, p. 36).

### **Part 3**

Part 3 of the book stresses the importance of understanding students. In addition, it prepares educators for managing student behavior issues and classroom management in general. Finally, this section details the importance of student motivation and how to make a positive impact therein. The three chapters are titled, “Motivation in the College Classroom”, “Teaching Culturally Diverse Students” and “Dealing with Student Problems and Problem Students”. As well as covering a range of different classroom management problems such as attention seekers, inattentive students, unprepared students, obsequious students and students with excuses, McKeachie also takes into account student associated problems: angry students, discouraged students, students who react emotionally to sensitive topics, and students with psychological problems (McKeachie, 2011, pp. 171-187). Each type of student could be present in a large enough class, so finding ways of managing these issues can be complicated. Each case requires a slightly different and specific approach since each student requires slightly different attention and care. Although debatable, it is reasonable to suggest that classroom management techniques

are really not one-size fits all, so an instructor must think dynamically and be flexible in his or her approach to a class and the individual students. For instance, if a student is dominating discussion too much, then that student might be utilized in a role where frequent participation helps the class. For non-participating or unprepared students, reminding them that their lack of participation will not go unnoticed is helpful. This might involve nominating students or assigning them roles in activities to not only maintain their attention, but to motivate them to be better prepared. When students react emotionally, McKeachie advises that it may be better to go the opposite route and remain calm and neutral, and not react too much to their outburst or comments. For example, in situations involving students with serious emotional issues, it is important to be approachable without becoming intrusive. It is suggested that instructors should care, but also keep in mind they are not trained counselors (in most cases) and should refrain from doing much more than listening sympathetically when students share personal problems (McKeachie, 2011, pp. 171-185).

Chapter 11 discusses student motivation and reminds educators that most university students are still transitioning into adulthood. The topic of locus of control is broached. Educators might imagine a classroom full of internally motivated students, but the reality for some students is that they are externally motivated by grades. In spite of this, this may indeed work in the favor of the instructor as positive feedback also takes the form of extrinsic motivation. As McKeachie suggests, an instructor can foster a sense of wonder and excitement towards learning which will complement the external motivation that learners at this age typically exhibit (McKeachie, 2011, p.149).

#### **Part 4**

In this section, teaching methodologies are explained with an emphasis on experiential learning. The four chapters comprising Part 4 are “Active Learning: Group-based Learning”, “Experiential Learning: Case-Based, Problem-Based, and Reality Based”, “Using High-Stakes

and Low Stakes Writing to Enhance Learning”, and “Technology and Teaching”. English instructors are taught to use communicative methodologies in the classroom, so this section of *Teaching Tips* dovetails well with prevailing best practices in English education. McKeachie states that, “Despite the fact that some instructors believe that telling is teaching, a learner really hasn’t stored new information in long term memory until he or she does something with that information” (McKeachie, p. 190). In this regard, this part of the book details various experience and group-based learning environments which most ESL/EFL instructors can benefit from.

Cooperative learning is a progressive teaching and learning strategy that requires groups of students to work together as learners in order to discover and learn material. In such learning environments, individuals in groups share different roles depending on the specific activities. That is, a student may be an instructor, facilitator, learner, mediator, or observer; but the students are always actively engaged in and responsible for their own learning. In order for the activity to be successful, all students must learn the material as well as help each other to learn the material. One of the benefits of cooperative learning as a teaching strategy is that students must collaborate and interact together in order to learn. This not only promotes interpersonal and team-building skills, which are valuable job market and academic attributes, but it also promotes diversity of opinion as well as race, culture, ethnicity, and so on. Furthermore, it builds self-esteem as students achieve something together. Cooperative learning is an invaluable classroom learning and teaching technique (McKeachie, 2011, p.190-200).

In addition to the information regarding group-based and cooperative learning, Part 4 also covers recommendations and advice for giving high and low stakes writing tasks to students. Low stakes writing is for exploration and making mistakes with few to no consequences. It is challenging to students, but when they know there are few consequences involved they are able to write more freely. Formal writing complements less formal writing by demanding more rigor and accuracy from students (McKeachie, 2011, pp. 232-3). This section of the book is

particularly useful and relevant since writing is one of the main competencies English instructors are often tasked with facilitating in a classroom. Finally, technology in the classroom is discussed with a number of examples of proper use. McKeachie argues that, "...the successful integration of technology entails careful consideration of course content, the capabilities of various technology tools, student access to and comfort with technology, and the instructor's view of his or her role in the teaching and learning process" (McKeachie, 2011, p. 264). Essentially, Part 4 serves as another useful resource for ESL/EFL instructors interested in learning more about teaching methodologies, motivation and effectively implementing technology in the classroom.

### **Part 5**

While Part 5 concerns tertiary level teaching in general, some sections are nonetheless relevant to ESL or EFL education and instruction. Titled "Skills for Use in Other Teaching Situations", this section consists of a chapter concerned with "Teaching Large Classes" and the lesser relevant, "Laboratory Instruction: Ensuring an Active Learning Experience". Like most of the book, active learning is a major theme. The first chapter discusses large auditorium classes. Though it may seem difficult to create collaborative activities, McKeachie introduces and elaborates on communicative techniques that work in large groups: interviews, small group projects, presentations, and small discussions.

### **Part 6**

This section of the book, subtitled "Teaching for Higher-Level Goals", considers how college or university level instructors can apply strategic learning principles to prepare students to become self-regulated learners. In three chapters titled "Teaching Students How to Become More Strategic and Self-Regulated Learners", "Teaching Thinking", and "The Ethics of Teaching and Teaching of Ethics", this part of *Teaching Tips* addresses perhaps the highest goal in education: critical thinking. Ultimately, McKeachie argues that the meaning of learning and



education is to be able to think and make decisions critically. Students must approach their education with confidence in their own learning processes and possess the desire and ingenuity to seek answers and understanding for themselves. Learning is an active process and an active learner understands his or her responsibility in that action. McKeachie notes that there are many resources available to students: instructors, professors, assistants, colleagues, libraries, laboratories and computers. These are all sources that a strategic learner utilizes in order to succeed in his or her studies. Once a learner realizes that ultimately he or she alone is responsible for their learning, great progress is made (McKeachie, 2011, p. 306).

Upon enrolling at a tertiary institution, it is sometimes the case that undergraduate students do not have a fully developed internal locus of control that guides them closer to knowledge, learning and understanding. To some extent, an instructor is thus tasked with preparing such students to become strategic learners. Sometimes students do not know how to obtain information or how to complete a task. McKeachie argues that students should be taught, or rather, shown how to become strategic learners. He cites the Talmudic expression: “If you teach a person to fish, you have fed them for a lifetime”. Then goes on to write that, “As college instructors, our task is to provide edible fish (content knowledge), but our task is also to teach our students how to fish (learning how to become strategic, self-regulated learners in our field)” (McKeachie, 2011, p. 306). Overall, this section of the book provides ways and means of checking comprehension and concept understanding that lend themselves very well to language instruction.

## Part 7

Part 7, called “Lifelong Learning for the Teacher”, is comprised of just one chapter titled “Vitality and Growth Throughout Your Teaching Career”. This chapter encourages instructors to be committed to lifelong development and learning. It offers a number of suggestions for continuing to improve: reading content literature, attending conferences, talking with peers and sharing ideas, publishing, seeking feedback from students and colleagues regularly, analyzing feedback, and finally, self-evaluating. This final chapter recognizes that there are ups and downs in teaching, but offers that through continued development, a teacher can and should maintain a positive approach towards the profession (McKeachie, 2011, pp. 331-343).

### Conclusion

*McKeachie’s Teaching Tips* is a comprehensive pedagogical reference for any instructor or professor at the university or college level. It does not provide an exhaustive treatment of each topic, but does offer a very insightful overview. The book is probably best encapsulated in its first pages where the author lists seven biases found in his own teaching philosophy:

1. What is important is learning, not teaching.
2. Teachers can be occasionally wrong.
3. Classes are unpredictable.
4. Increasing student motivation is of the utmost importance.
5. Most student learning occurs outside the classroom.
6. Students can learn more in talking to one another than listening to us if we prepare them for such interaction.
7. One key to improvement is reflection. (McKeachie, 2011, pp. 5-6)

In conclusion, *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips* provides a broad, student-centered, humanistic approach towards teaching and learning. The book focuses on the benefits of active and

collaborative learning at the tertiary level of education and thus serves as a reliable teaching reference for ESL and EFL professionals at colleges and universities.

## References

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